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*Beneficent America*

The Foreign Correspondence  
of the  
*Bureau of War Risk Insurance*  
of the  
Treasury Department

By A. Palmieri, Ph. D.

March 18th 1919



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## PREFATORY NOTE

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These pages are cordially inscribed to my co-workers in the Bureau of War Risk Insurance. Criticism as to a few true and many alleged deficiencies of the Bureau have been widely circulated in the American Press. An institution which in the shortest possible time was compelled to recruit a body of 14,000 workers, and to enter into correspondence with every country, and persons in every walk of life, throughout the civilized world, could not escape being at times unsuccessful in its initial methods.

Criticism, however, does not disprove the statement that the Bureau of War Risk Insurance is one of the best creations of the American organizing genius. It has done admirable work. It has not only alleviated the untold sufferings of countless victims of the world war, but has made the United States the seat of an international and beneficent brotherhood.

Its members have been equal to the loftiness of their task. When its history will be written, every good American will better appreciate the efforts of thousands of modest workers who have given themselves to the utmost to the upraising of an institution, which the other nations may envy but which none has attempted to build on such majestic lines.

The author wishes to express his thanks to Miss H. M. Sweet, Room 155, Treasury, for having kindly typewritten the manuscript for the printer.

A. PALMIERI

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## BENEFICENT AMERICA

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In a classical work on the immigration problem, my attention was called to the following passage: "The immigration of foreigners into the United States has been long recognized as one of our important social and political problems. Perhaps no other question has aroused more bitter feelings at times, or has called out more lofty sentiments of altruistic purpose. On the one hand, our government has been besought to protect our people from the degrading influence of the immigrant. On the other, it has been declared that our doors should never be closed against those suffering from religious or political persecution. Generally speaking, there has been little difference of opinion regarding the latter sentiment. There has been great difference of opinion, however, relative to the effects, — economic, social and moral, of immigration upon American standards of living." (1)

The immigration problem has a moral aspect. "Do the foreign immigrants imbibe the spirit, the sentiments, the ideals of America? These strangers of all races and nations who come and go; will they help to make our history and shape our destinies?" The question was unanswered before the war. Now, that the storm is over, we reply in the affirmative. The constant unity of purpose of all the sons of America, both by birth and by adoption, has shown the groundlessness of the opponents of immigration.

The war has truly marked the greatest victory of Ameri-

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(1) J. W. Jenks and W. J. Lauck. *The Immigration Problem*, New York, 1917, p. 2.



can idealism. It has brought into full light the magic power of what may be called the fascination of America. As soon as the trumpet was sounded, all the racial hatreds, the religious antinomies, the struggles of classes of alien immigrants, were superseded. The vision of America drawing the sword to fight for the dearest liberties of mankind, and the onward sweep of democratic institutions filled all hearts and minds. The national consciousness of all Americans, both native and foreign born, shone forth in broad daylight. The alien immigrants instinctively felt that it was an honor to rise in arms under the American flag, for the war waged by America marked a new era in the history of the ceaseless effort of the human race towards a wider brotherhood of peoples and nations.

The world war has put into full light this fact that when the hour of danger strikes, America can trust all the members of her great family. Those whom the migratory movement brought from old Europe into the healthy organic life of American democracy have been Americans of spiritual lineage on the bloody battlefields of France, Belgium, Italy and Russia. America is indeed the only nation to possess the spiritual energy in the assimilation of foreign elements, to such a high degree as to transform them into flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone.

It is in translating the foreign correspondence of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance that the writer of these pages realized the success of the Americanization of alien immigrants to this country. By the term Americanization, I mean the spiritual evolution which relieves the immigrants from the burden of racial prejudices, manners and customs brought from the old world, and imbues them with the American ideal of freedom and the political institutions which embody it. In the letters of the foreign born who have been serving under the American flag the spiritual Americanization alluded to presents itself as an accomplished fact. They breathe the purest love for American ideals. Moreover, through the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, the relatives of those soldiers have felt the generous hand of America, and thus the spirit of Americanism has expanded beyond its political frontiers. In the hearts of many who have never come to this country, America is looked upon as the nation predestined to weave the golden bonds of international love.

The foreign correspondence of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance is handled by few translators, who, after a short period of inevitable groping, found their own way and fulfilled their task to the best of their capacity. The earliest documents translated by them were written in French, Spanish, Italian.

Soon, however, the philological task of the Bureau increased notably. Letters came from Greece. Slav soldiers or their relatives used their own languages in communicating with the Bureau. Their example was followed by the immigrants from the Scandinavian or Eastern countries. It soon became necessary, therefore, to increase the staff.

The foreign correspondence of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance embraces letters written in thirty different languages. We may group them under several headings, as follows:

1 — **Latin correspondence.** Letters written in the romance languages form the bulk of all the foreign correspondence; chiefly Italian, French and Spanish. We have received letters in Portuguese and Roumanian, and translated numerous official documents from ecclesiastical Latin.

2 — **The Slavic correspondence.** All the Slavic languages are represented. The writer has handled letters and documents written in Russian, Polish, Bohemian, Slovak, Ruthenian, Slovene, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Paleoslav (Liturgical Slavonic). To these languages, because of its geographical position, Lithuanian may be added, although it is not a Slavic tongue.

3 — **The Scandinavian correspondence.** Letters and documents in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are grouped under this heading.

4 — **The Ural—Altaic languages,** embracing letters written in Finnish, Esthonian and Hungarian.

5 — **The Greek correspondence.** This is one of the most important of the Bureau, and comes next in volume after the Italian correspondence.

6 — **The Germanic correspondence.** Letters and documents written in German, Dutch and Flemish.

7 — **The Semitic and Armenian correspondence.** It embraces letters and documents written in rabbinical Hebrew and Yiddish, and in Armenian and Arabic.

8 — **The Far-Eastern correspondence.** It embraces letters and documents written in Japanese, Chinese and Hindustani. These languages are dealt with outside of the translation staff of the Bureau.

9 — **Malayan languages and Hawaiian.** Hawaiian letters and others in Tagalo, Vizayan, Becol, Tlocano and other Philippine dialects, have been received.

A simple enumeration of these languages shows that the Bureau of War Risk Insurance is in touch with the most remote countries of the world. Within its narrow limits, the Bureau feels the throbbing pulse of all the peoples who have aligned themselves with America in the giant struggle against militaristic autocracies. Its staff hears, in the most varied



languages, the same voice of the "champion of free mankind".

It is not an easy task to translate the documents the Bureau receives from its foreign correspondents, many of whom are illiterate. The Italians, who are exceedingly numerous, write in almost all the dialects of their provinces. According to their geographic position, the Greeks intersperse their common tongue with Turkish words, or they cull from their classical writers the gaudiest blossoms of style. The Slavic writers, especially the Poles, seem to have forgotten entirely the rules of the national orthography. The letters in the Slavic languages put to test, not only the grammatical and lexicographical learning of their translators, but also their patience.

I happened once to pore over a letter whose strange words were variegated with frequent "van". "The writer is Dutch", I said to myself. But, to my great surprise, I found myself unable to draw out the hidden meaning of that unusual language. The words looked like Finnish, but the Finnish dictionary threw no light on the mystery of the apocalyptic sheet. It was unveiled, however, as soon as I read the first lines of the letter aloud. The writer had written in plain English while taking the liberty of transcribing the English words according to the Dutch pronunciation.

In their rude and uncouth style, these foreign letters have a great human value. They show, as it were, that even the most illiterate among the soldiers have perceived the basis of a most profound philosophy of the war. Far from being the "dumb bayonets" of whom a Russian General once boasted, the soldiers enlisted in the American armies, from whatsoever corner of the world they came, are men who know for what they are fighting and why they are morally bound to fight. They are willing to sacrifice their lives for the freedom of all peoples and for a better social organization. Their letters breathe an air of serenity, of confidence, even when death lay in wait of their writers in the mud of the trenches. "We are fighting for America", say proudly these sons of the last hour, and they are happy because their adopted land has provided for their mothers, wives or children in the old country. The first impression, therefore, we receive, when reading these foreign letters, is that of the moral conquest by American idealism of the alien elements, whom economic reasons, rather than religious or social ones, compelled to seek refuge on the hospitable soil of America.

"Dear Sister," writes a Scandinavian, "I am now a soldier for Uncle Sam. I suppose you do not understand why I am going to the front when I do not have to, but this is a good and a free country, and worth fighting for. What would I have



been if I had been in Denmark now? I will give all I have to this country or for this country, and the only thing I have worth talking about is my life, which is no better than that of anyone else. There are many married men that are going. I did not have to go but I wanted to go and I went. Remember America did not enter the war for gain! No! It is to make the world a good and safe place to live in; it is to protect the small countries in Europe and for the future generation; it is for my own sister that I and all the American soldiers fight, and I do not think we will stop before we reach Berlin and capture the Kaiser and the men he has around him. My dear sister, I have taken out, or rather Uncle Sam has given me an insurance policy which you, my own darling girl shall have in case I shall be killed..... After the war, I will come home to see you and if you want to go, I will take you back with me to the far West, to the beautiful and free country, the only free country in the world, which has been much better to me than Denmark ever was or ever will be!" Greek soldiers express the same feelings. The war that demands of some of them the supreme sacrifice is a war of redemption. "I am sure", writes a Greek soldier to his father, "if anything should happen to me that you will receive the news with heroism of a true Greek and that you will not be sorry if you lose your son, who is fighting for the safety of humanity, for Greece, and America, and France."

Here another quotation from a Greek letter, "I wish to inform you that I am a soldier in the American army. I know that you will be sorry, as you are my parents, but think how the world is suffering today from the German menace. Everybody must do his bit. We must keep the Germans from attempting to dominate the world; they have to understand that they are going to be defeated. We must let them know that small nations have equal rights to live with the big nations, and we must no longer have the German sword hanging over our heads."

Liberty is a gift from God to humanity and nobody has the right to deprive them of it. The quotation that follows harmoniously blends the ancient ideals of classic Greece with the modern aspirations of the genuine American spirit. "The American government, with great energy, is preparing a big army, and every soldier expects to be sent over soon to fight the Hun. In their patriotic speeches, the officers mention our country, Greece, as being the first democracy in the world, from which the American democracy is derived. Such kind words make me proud of my native country and I am ready to give everything for my adopted one."

From another Greek letter: "I want to tell you that I am a soldier in the American Army, and I am very much satisfied. In a short time I will be sent to France to fight for justice, and if my destiny has reserved the honor of my death there, you will remember that at least I have done something in this world, that I fought for the liberty and rights of mankind."

Let us have some quotations from the letters of American soldiers of Italian descent. In cheerful fashion one of them describes the hardships of the military life: "We are obliged to cook our meals without fire and our shoes are in bad shape, with the soles broken, but, after all, we are happy to fulfill our duty towards our American flag." Others, and they are legion, lay stress upon their glory of being called to fight for the defence of civilization, of freedom, and above all of America, the country where they have found what the old Europe could not grant to them, democratic liberty.

There is much in common in these letters. The words are different, but they express the same feelings. An exalted patriotism is not the monopoly, so to speak, of native Americans. It is vigorous in the souls of those who by the constant additions of immigration are toiling and moiling to achieve in its minutest details the magnificent building of American democracy. One recalls the phrase of a keen observer who wrote that "A man may be a good and patriotic citizen of the United States even though he knows no English. Like Francis Lieber, his heart may long have learned to throb American pulsations, though his lips may still be refractory in nationalizing themselves." The truth of this remark is brought out in any reading of the letters of the soldiers of foreign descent, or any study of their simple language. I think that there is no ground to fear a lessening of American ideals because of the streams of alien immigration. A subtle spiritual force works out the miracle of transforming the illiterate, raw material coming to us into a virile manhood. New elements of life are added to the store of American vital power. That those elements are mostly sound and morally strong, we may infer from this foreign correspondence. Like native Americans, they have fought for the same American ideals, with the same enthusiasm and the same gallantry. The moral fascination of American idealism has been more powerful than racial antipathy, religious animosity, and social inequality.

The second impression I have felt in translating the letters of the foreign allottees is that of a supreme exaltation of motherhood. All of us have spoken of the great services rendered by the women of the allied countries in the final crushing of German militarism. We are better acquainted,



however, with how much the women have done than with how much they have suffered. The inward tragedies of the mother's hearts have perhaps not been brought into relief. They are the heroines of the world war. They have refrained from tears and have smiled to fill their sons with the love of sacrifice; whether Greek or French or Italian or Slav, the mothers of the American soldiers of foreign descent have found in their simple style words that have stirred up the most generous feelings in their sons' hearts. Their language at times reminds us of the noblest expression of the Spartan mothers. They are short poems with a really tragic sublimity. In a few words they tell the story of endless martyrdom. "I have received the news of the death of my son", writes an Italian mother. "My heart bleeds to death, but I feel in every fibre that I have fulfilled my duty in allowing my son to be immolated for a loftiest and holiest cause." A Greek mother of Sparta shows in the following extract the genuineness of her lineage: "As the ancient Spartan mothers used to send their sons to war with joyful songs, so do I, my son, from the sweet country of liberty, Greece, I send you my blessings and motherly kisses, and I pray to God and our Virgin to strengthen you in your fight against German brutality. Do not come back without the laurels of victory." A mother of the island of Crete, the nursery of the pioneers of Greek independence, bravely calls her son to face death: "I know, my boy, that you are not strong enough, but the gallant soldiers when in the thick of the battle don't think of anything. They draw strength from the sacred conviction that they are facing death for the safety of mankind, and then they are strong as lions, and endure their sufferings without murmur. As a mother, of course, I shed tears, my son, but on the other hand I am proud to offer the life of my life upon the altar of liberty."

I remember a letter of a Polish mother who, in a moment of despair, had claimed the immediate release of her son from the army. She was dying of sorrow, of anger, of abandon. Two days after the sending of her previous letter, she wrote again to the Bureau: "I wish to call back what I said to you yesterday. When I think of so many victims which the war has taken, and how terrible are its ravages, I am ashamed of myself. For the moment I was demented by a feeling of egotism, and I wished to have my son back. Let my son fulfill his duties as it behooves a faithful son of my country. I will never be against anything which the war makes necessary, and especially what is required by such a great President as Wilson. I am ready to endure the most cruel torments, and I ask your

forgiveness concerning my previous mistake, which I committed in a moment of despair."

The counsel that mothers give their sons is full of lofty ideas, and noble concepts. Note the language of an Italian mother: "We learn that you have been serving in the army for the rights of justice and freedom, for our love and dignity, for the greatness of America. I know this, because in spite of the fact that we are so far beyond the Ocean, we wish you to give help with your youthful courage, and crush and trample down forever our agelong enemies. No fears, no sighs escape from our bosoms, but though boundless space divides us from you, our encouragement and perennial blessings will be always with you."

The third feeling awakened in me by the reading of the foreign correspondence of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance is that of thankfulness to America. All the letters coming from foreign countries exalt the generosity of "the nourisher of starving peoples", to quote the expression of a Greek writer. Thousands of families, hundreds of thousands of women and children, have been saved from starvation by the payments from the Bureau of War Risk Insurance.

Here is a quotation from the letter of an Italian mother: "My entire family united with myself, pray God that war may end with victory for America, because America has practised the seven works of mercy. She has given food to the starving, and distributed bread. Surely, God will protect all Americans, and they will be honored throughout the world. My prayer will be heard before God, and victory will be for America."

There is the characteristic feature of the Sicilian vivacity and Italian deference in a letter to President Wilson from an Austrian-bater of Palermo: "You cannot imagine the happiness that the little, old Italian father of a soldier feels after reading your magnanimous words, and of the good that you are doing for all the people of the whole world, and of the peace that will be bestowed by God through so worthy a person. I read these words on a picture of your handsome and gracious person — We will win the war for world peace. — I do not care for the fact that my son was able to send me twenty-five or thirty dollars a month before his enlistment, provided we shall be able to destroy the tyrant, and cry aloud: Long live President Wilson! Long live the Army! Long live America!"

Some of the Italian letters are impregnated with the most delicate feelings of maternal love and religious gratitude. "I have received your money, dear, dearest son. I have kissed



it. I went to Church to light candles before the image of the Blessed Virgin. I have thought of the days when I have denied to myself a morsel of bread to nourish you. My blessings upon you, dearest son! May they be as numerous as the drops of milk I gave you. I shall not squander the money which generous America grants you. I am satisfied with a piece of bread. I will wait for you, and keep your money, and when you will come back, crowned with the laurels of victory, I shall accompany you to the Church; we shall pray together, and adorn the altar of the Blessed Virgin with flowers and candles."

We are at the end of our quotations. They tell of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance more and better than the most eloquent self-eulogies. In a recent address to the employes of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, Colonel Henry D. Lindsley wrote: "The work in which we are engaged is one of the most remarkable undertakings in all history, both in magnitude and purpose. The War Risk Insurance Act is a monument to civilization, and those who are privileged to help in its administration are rendering a social service that is the highest expression of the humanity which our soldiers and sailors fought to save."

And that is the Bureau of War Risk Insurance not only according to the verdict of native Americans, but also according to that of a plebiscite of all the nations. And no doubt, when fulfilling their task, when weary of their labors, when meeting with obstacles in their mission, the tireless workers connected with it think of the many tears that have been dried by their toil, they deeply feel the nobility of their call, and the honor of writing the brightest page of the history of beneficent America.









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